

Promoting Equitable Access to Unemployment Compensation Programs: Overview of State Equity Grants

Quantitative Overview of Approved Grants

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has approved equity grants to 26 states and jurisdictions, as of September 1, 2022. In many instances, one grant will include multiple projects and as a result, states will receive funding to implement 107 different projects designed to promote equitable access to unemployment compensation programs. In designing their projects, states had broad flexibility to develop their own state-specific strategies to promote equitable access within their own jurisdiction. The AIR team reviewed and analyzed grant proposals for approved equity grants from 26 states and jurisdictions to implement 107 different projects and identified the following for each project:

- project topic, both primary and secondary.
- target populations.
- and languages other than English used in the projects.

Our review revealed some salient themes:

States are using a diverse slate of strategies to address equity: Exhibit 1 lists the seven primary project topics that surfaced in proposals.

Exhibit 1.

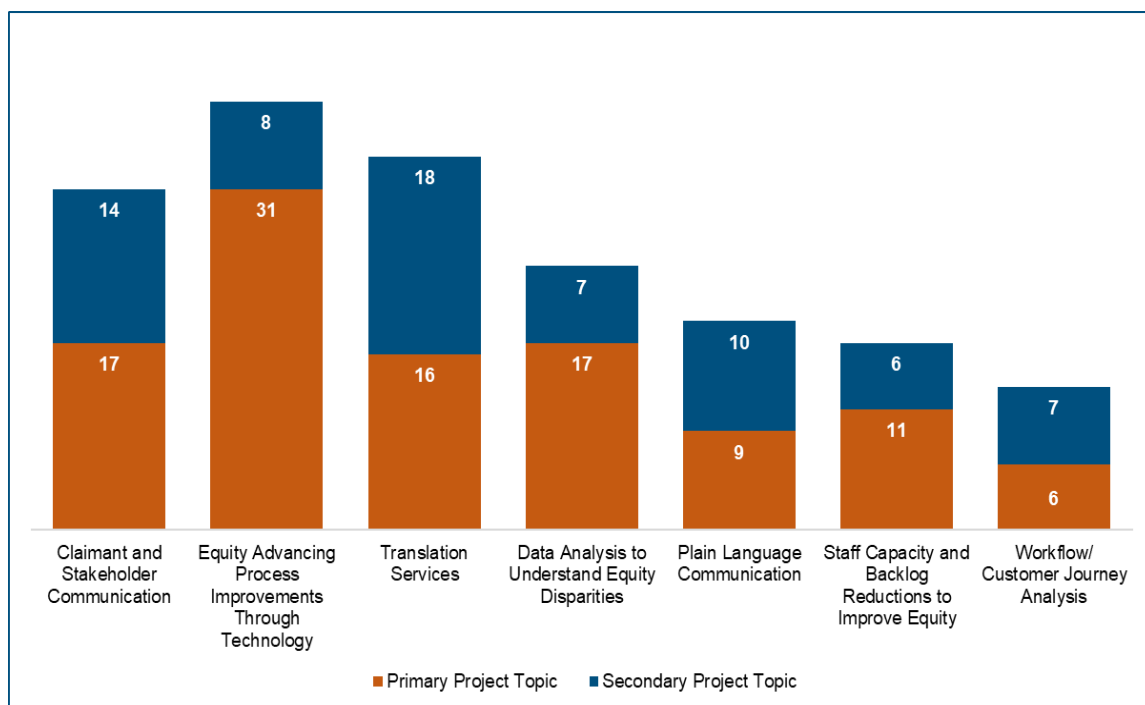
The team identified seven primary project topics, as described in proposals:

- Claimant Communications and Claimant Outreach
- Equity-Advancing Process Improvements Through Technology
- Translation Services
- Data Analysis to Understand Equity Disparities
- Plain Language Communication
- Staff Capacity and Backlog Reductions to Improve Equity
- Workflow/Customer Journey Analysis

In some instances, these strategies were also part of broader solutions to address operational, programmatic, or technological issues. **Projects addressed topics such as claimant communication process improvements and technology improvements that are all linked to underlying equity barriers for specific populations.**

The **most common areas of focus** for state equity projects were equity-advancing process improvements through technology, translation services, and equitable access through claimant and stakeholder communication. The chart below identifies the project topic descriptions used in the analysis, along with the number of projects that addressed each topic as either a primary or secondary area of focus.¹

Project Topics (Primary and Secondary)



Projects target a wide range of underserved populations: All state equity projects target specific populations. Our review focused on identifying the target populations for each state equity project. Across all states, projects identified 20 classifications of underserved populations and eleven other state-specific populations. Many state projects focused on overlapping demographic and socioeconomic characteristics that present barriers to access to the UI program, either initially through claim intake or at other strategic points within the overall claim process. As a result, **many state projects recognized the intersectional challenges of multiple barriers for individuals** who are part of several targeted populations. Some designed multiple, intersecting projects, which when implemented in a comprehensive manner, address the compounded impact of multiple barriers for those

¹ The AIR team reviewed grant proposals from 26 states and jurisdictions involving 107 different projects.

individuals.

States plan to use equity grants to expand the use of translation services. Although only 34 projects identified translation services as their primary or secondary topic, our review revealed that in addition to 1 jurisdiction, 20 out of the 25 states whose applications were reviewed mentioned the use of a language other than English in their projects. **A great diversity of languages was mentioned.** The team identified 28 unique languages that states will address in their projects. The predominant language mentioned was Spanish, although several projects also include Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

Overview of State's Work Specific to Topics

Although states' projects were varied in their scope, project type and focus, several overarching themes emerged from this analysis, which do not all map directly to the project topics as described in proposals. Many related to **conducting customer outreach and expanding and improving services to claimants**. States often planned to achieve these goals through plain language communication efforts and increased staffing. Some states proposed increasing staff capacity to address backlogs, while others proposed creating new staff positions focused on claimant communication, outreach, and navigation services. Examples of state projects in each of the project topic areas are described below, including similar projects being undertaken in multiple states.

Claimant Communications

- Gathering data on language preference from UI claimants; capturing this data in the claimant record to trigger automatic translation requests and identifying the need for translation services to these claimants
- Establishing automated notifications to claimants informing them of their claim status, and informing them of key milestones
- Creating a virtual 'new claimant orientation' seminar, conducted via Teams or Zoom, by subject matter experts on the claims filing, continued claims, and protests/appeals processes
- Incorporating text messaging to communicate more effectively with claimants (6 state projects)

Customer Outreach

- Conducting customer surveys to identify underserved populations, increasing partnerships with community-based organizations serving those target populations
- Conducting user research to identify website content most frequently accessed by users; identifying a website redesign that will make this content easier to find
- Determining best methods of communication to targeted populations and increasing agency presence through community outreach and engagement efforts to include employers in education on program eligibility and layoff alternatives

Equity Advancing Process Improvements Through Technology

States are also focused on **advancing equity by using technology to streamline claim filing**, certification, and

other processes specifically for underserved populations.

- Analyzing timeliness data for population groups with UI system accessibility challenges to identify disparities; using findings to develop strategies to remove barriers and drive staff training curriculum
- Analyzing customer journey using data-driven models to identify areas of inequity; developing and presenting visualizations of data; making recommendations for UI business and system improvements
- Creating a single reporting tool by combining data from multiple platforms (benefits management, phone system, public website, employer wage reporting system); using combined data to analyze customer outcomes
- Allowing the user to take a picture of their document with their mobile device and directly upload it to the UI Benefits Solution and attach it to the claim
- Updating the Fact-Finding process that will result in a simplified, easy to understand process tailored to the claimant through dynamic and responsive questions (mobile device friendly and available in English and Spanish)
- Increasing the functionality of the mobile application to provide claimants the ability to:
 - schedule meetings with adjudicators
 - view or complete action items that will facilitate determining eligibility or payment of their weekly claim
 - see the status of their appeal
 - view monetary details regarding their claim
 - view issue details
 - view child support summary information and dependent information
 - upload generic documents
- Developing an automated chatbot to provide people with real-time assistance while filing their initial claim

Translation Services

The **expanded use of translation services is being seen in the translation of videos, mobile applications, customer facing web pages, and phone system scripts.** Some projects are also translating websites and claimant communications into several languages.

- Translating all RESEA (Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment) and Eligibility Review related screens into Spanish
- Translating mobile application screens into Spanish to improve navigability
- Upgrading online systems to display customer screens in additional languages
- Creating short instructional videos, in English and Spanish, to explain common UI services (5 state projects)

Data Analysis to Understand Equity Disparities

Data analysis projects included in the proposals typically involve analyzing data points from the customer journey or **analyzing large data populations to understand and identify equity disparities**.

- Focusing on using data to further understand equity disparities, some involving technology/system improvements before the analysis can take place (24 projects)
- Examining administrative data to determine how it can be paired with publicly available data (e.g., LMI (Labor Market Information), Census, BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) LEHD (Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics) to draw meaningful and actionable conclusions about UI access delineated by demographic, geographic and other differentiating information such as:
 - reciprocity rate
 - application rate
 - nonseparation issues per week claimed
 - denial rates
 - non-monetary determination timeliness
 - appeal and reversal rates and
 - denied claim accuracy
- Implementing geocoding of claimant addresses, to allow for better evaluation of internal data and targeted outreach
- Making improvements in data structures to analyze demographic information including race/ethnicity, sex, age, and disability status for claims, adjudication, appeals and payment outcomes
- Creating Equity Analytics Dashboard to look at claimant participation at various stages of claim filing status - initial claims, fact finding, adjudication, appeals, weekly certification, monetary protests, elapsed times for claims filing, determination of eligibility and payment

Plain Language

- Conducting plain language and accessibility reviews of current UI informational web pages, handbooks, and claimant- and employer-facing materials; incorporating plain language to improve readability (13 state projects)
- Simplifying fact-finding experience for claimants by creating dynamic and responsive questions using plain language, driven by a decision tree within the IT (Information Technology) system, to tailor the fact-finding experience to the individual claimant
- Revising claimant facing screens in the UI benefits application using plain language and re-deploying them for easier use by claimants. Revising phone system scripts using plain language and redeploying them for easier use by claimants. Creating web chat scripts using plain language.

Staff Capacity and Backlog Reductions to Improve Equity - Customer Service Improvements Through Tactical Staffing

- Creating new staff positions focused on increasing responsiveness to customers with barriers, helping

claimants navigate the claims process, and conducting outreach to target populations (6 state projects)

- Hiring claimant liaisons for specific targeted areas/groups within a state that will work closely with community organizations aligned with that specific group to identify community barriers and provide solutions
- Increasing staffing to address appeals backlogs (5 state projects)
- Creating a business unit focusing on equitable access for UI claimants
- Adding UI staff to local job centers to improve customer service
- Hiring Spanish speaking staff for call centers and training interviewers to serve Spanish speaking claimants more effectively

Workflow/ Customer Journey Analysis

- Using Human Centered Design (HCD) best practices and behavioral insights to improve the digital experience of claimants (3 state projects)
- Studying the customer journey while engaging with the UI system to identify areas of inequity
- Reviewing current workflow and queue process of monetary determinations that need additional work; implementing changes to resolve monetary determinations more efficiently
- Performing a customer journey analysis that will include a customer service quality evaluation (including review of all communications and letters)
- Evaluating the appeals customer journey to include the current appeals environment, processes, and practices

DOL is continuing to award additional equity grants to states. As additional state equity projects are approved, the mix of project topics, target populations, and languages used is diversifying. **The use of technology and translation services to address equity issues in the claim process, adjudication and appeals process is expanding and the states utilizing more innovative solutions to address equity disparities in the UI program is evident** in the projects funded to date.